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ABSTRACT

Ambiguity concerning the professional value of the master's degree for graduate students in sociology is discussed. Four factors are identified as contributing to this ambiguity: (1) the lack of uniform standards and requirements for the degree in American higher education; (2) the decline in the prestige of the degree in academic circles; (3) the degree is more often linked to professional practice than to academic scholarship; and (4) the degree has become the weakest in the most highly rated and prestigious institutions. Results of a survey of 98 departments of sociology indicate departmental agreement that the master's degree program serves as a method of evaluating student capacity for successfully completing the doctoral program and as an opportunity for the student to acquire research experience prior to undertaking the dissertation. All departments indicated willingness to accept transfer candidates for their doctoral programs, although varying amounts of course credit are given for previous work. Two changes in the present system are proposed. First, the substitution of a piece of publishable sociological research in lieu of formal requirements for the master's degree. Second, development of terminal professional master's programs in areas of applied sociology. References are included. (Author/DB)

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The Questionable Value Of The Master's Degree In Sociology For The Ph.D.-Pursuing Student

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Background

The meaning of the master's degree in sociology has always been vague. This can be attributed in large part to the general ambiguity that has plagued almost all master's degree programs in the U.S., regardless of discipline, ever since their inception in American higher education. As early as 1902, the Association of American Universities debated whether the master's degree should be regarded primarily as a terminal degree or as a steppingstone to the doctorate. In 1910, Calvin Thomas of Columbia University described the degree to a meeting of the AAU as "slightly a cultural degree, partly a research degree, but everywhere a teaching degree mainly for secondary schools" (Berelson, 1960:185). An AAUP Committee, in 1932, came to the conclusion that the "widespread dissatisfaction" concerning the master's degree "is justified," and this conclusion was fully agreed to in a 1945 AAU report on the issue. In 1934, a committee of the American Council on Education worked unsuccessfully to clear up the confusion that existed at that time regarding the conflicting academic and professional uses of the degree. In that same year a U.S. Office of Education Report noted that the meaning of the degree "doubtless never will be answered finally." (Berelson, 1960:185)

Very little, if anything has taken place in more recent years to alter this situation. Berelson (1960) points out that today a "confusion of inconsistency" continues to exist regarding the meaning of the master's degree in the United States. He quotes an anonymous Harvard graduate dean as declaring that the master's degree is, at present,". . . a bit like a

street-walker--all things to all men (and at different prices)" (1960:185).

This ambiguity concerning the meaning of the master's degree can be attributed to four factors. First, there is the lack of uniform standards and requirements for the degree in American higher education. Berelson (1960:186) quotes Howard Mumford Jones as having said that the master's degree in the United States "began as a social distinction, became a post-graduate degree, . . . and is today alternately a consolation prize, an insurance policy, or a sop to public education."

In addition to the traditional MA and MS, the degree also appears in some 100 other forms, such as MEd, MFA, MPA, MSW, MBA, MLS, etc., and the fulfillment of very widely differing requirements. As Berelson (1960) points out, the degree is awarded for work ranging from the completion of one year of course work beyond the bachelor's degree, with no comprehensive examination, no thesis or equivalent "essay," and no foreign language, through the full two-year professional programs, as in the case of the MBA or MSW, to the rare three year program, as with the MFA degree, which is universally recognized as a very strong degree. Such a proliferation of the forms and requirements of the master's degree is clearly indicative of the high degree of ambiguity that has come to characterize the degree in the United States.

A second factor responsible for the ambiguity of the degree is the decline in its prestige, particularly in academic circles, that has been brought about by the increasing diversity of standards and requirements for the degree. This decline in the prestige of the degree has been accelerated by the awarding of increasing numbers of master's degrees each year in the face of a heightened emphasis on the significance of the doctorate (Grigg, 1965:56-57). In 1960 alone, 121 varieties of MA's and

272 varieties of MS's were awarded in the U. S. (Snell, 1965:86). It is generally agreed in academic circles that the degree means less today than it did in the past, and in most academic disciplines it is no longer regarded seriously as an index of professional achievement (Jones, 159:201).

A third factor accounting the ambiguity of the degree is that it is often linked to professional practice rather than to academic scholarship. Berelson (1960) notes that in the 1957-1958 academic year only 29% of the master's degrees awarded were in the arts and sciences. This is 10% less than ten years earlier. Much of this appears to be due to the pressure exerted on teachers by requirements that make the master's degree necessary for merit raises and promotion. This has tended to concentrate a very large number of master's degrees in the area of professional education. Berelson (1960) points out that in 1940 only about one-third of all master's degrees conferred were in education but that 20 years later, at the time of publication, nearly one-half were.

Finally, a fourth important factor contributing to the ambiguity of the degree is the fact that it has become the weakest in the most highly rated and prestigious institutions. In the early years of this century, the master's degree was somewhat stronger in departments that did not award the doctorate. Today it is decidedly weaker in universities that concentrate on doctoral level work. Berelson (1960) found in a survey of graduate departments that the twelve most highly rated universities award only about 15% of the total number of master's degrees in a given academic year. The attitude of many of the more prestigious universities seems to be summed up in this recommendation

of a "Committee on the Educational Future of Columbia University," as quoted by Berelson (1960:188):

> "The emphasis in graduate work...should be on the training of Ph.D. candidates. Some departments, indeed, may wish to receive only students who state their intentions to proceed to the Ph.D., although some may intend to take the Master of Arts degree as an incident (sic) in the process..."

When a student enters a doctoral program, he embarks on a period of preparation the completion date of which is relatively uncertain. By electing to take the master's degree along the way, he usually lengthens significantly the time required to complete the program, yet, as Prior (1965) has noted, after the doctorate is acquired, the graduate tends to look back upon the master's degree as simply one of the many pre-doctoral hurdles that he has successfully surmounted. Snell (1965) reports that 53% of the students who completed their doctoral programs under the initial Title IV NDEA three year fellowships elected to move directly to the doctorate rather than taking the master's degree. Of those who chose to take the M.A. degree, half reported that they considered the master's program a waste of time; the other half said that only the thesis work in the program was a useful and worthwhile experience. Ironically, as noted by Laskin (1968), the student who decides to bypass the master's degree enroute to the doctorate quite often gains considerably in prestige in the eyes of both fellow students and faculty.

In the field of sociology, recent research has demonstrated that once he has acquired the doctorate, the professional sociologist

does not benefit significantly in any way by having taken the master's degree enroute. Clemente and Webb (1973) have shown that possession of the master's degree by sociologists who also possess the doctorate is not significantly related in any way to career professional productivity. They found that there was no significant difference between the overall scholarly productivity of sociologists possessing both the doctorate and the master's degree and that of sociologists possessing the doctorate only.

The Survey

These findings and observations raise serious questions as to the meaning, value, and utility of the master's degree in sociology and its role in the education of the professional sociologist. In order to explore this matter further, a questionnaire asking for information about the place of the master's degree in their doctoral programs was sent to each of the 98 departments of sociology listed as offering such programs in the 1972-1973 A.S.A. Guide to Graduate Departments of Sociology. Eighty-six (88%) of the questionnaires were completed and returned, and all questionnaires were used in compiling and analyzing the data reported in this paper. The returned questionnaires were sorted into two groups corresponding to two categories used by Roose and Andersen (1970) in their recent rating of graduate departments of sociology. The questionnaire responses from the eighteen departments that were among the 21 most highly rated in the Roose and Andersen study[1] were tabulated and analyzed separately from those of the remaining sixty-eight departments that responded. These data appear, along with totals for the entire sample, in Tables 1 through 3.

THE FINDINGS

Eighty-one of the eighty-six departments responding reported that they regularly offer master's degree programs. However, only ten regard them as separate terminal degree programs. Among Roose and Andersen's leading departments, sixteen of the eighteen award the master's degree but only one offers it as a terminal degree[2].

Sixty-nine of the eighty-one departments offering master's degree programs require their students to take the degree as part of their doctoral programs. Of the most highly rated departments, twelve of the eighteen, compared to fifty-seven of the sixty-five others, maintain this requirement.

Departments indicating that the master's degree is a required part of their doctoral programs were asked to indicate what the M.A. degree work was designed to accomplish as an integral part of their programs. All departments reporting seem to be agreed that the master's degree program serves primarily as a method of evaluating the student's capacity for successfully completing the doctoral program, and secondarily as an opportunity for the student to acquire research experience prior to undertaking the dissertation (Table 1). However,

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

a smaller proportion of the leading departments, as compared to all others, regard the M.A. program as providing skills and knowledge essential to undertaking the dissertation. An even smaller proportion of these departments report the use of the master's degree as a consolation prize.

All of the departments surveyed indicated their willingness to accept, as candidates for their doctoral programs, applicants

who have earned master's degrees in sociology at other departments. However, the leading departments, as compared to all others, show less preference for applicants possessing the M.A. degree from other departments (Table 2). They also indicate a greater tendency to

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

treat such candidates as though they were beginning graduate students. At the same time, these departments report a lesser tendency to limit their consideration of master's degree applicants to the outstanding or exceptionally strong candidates.

When asked to indicate how much of an applicant's M.A. program work was usually accepted for credit toward the completion of their doctoral programs, a relatively small percentage of all departments surveyed reported policies of not accepting any of the applicants master's degree work whatsoever (Table 3). However, the leading departments show a greater tendency to treat all doctoral candidates initially as first-year graduate students. They also report a higher

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

incidence of policies that impose special conditions with respect to the transfer of credits from other departments. The leading departments more often reported the practices of : 1) evaluating each applicant as a special case; 2) placing strict limits on the number of courses and other credits that may be transferred; 3) requiring the applicant to take the department's own core program or equivalency examinations, regardless of any corresponding course work or examinations that may have been taken elsewhere[3].

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this survey indicate that despite the long-standing ambiguities in the meaning and the role of the master's degree in American higher education, most Ph.D.-awarding departments of sociology in American universities continue to offer the degree and to define it primarily as a steppingstone to the doctorate. Thus, unless he is enrolled in one of the few departments that do not require or expect their students to take the master's degree as part of their doctoral programs, the student in pursuit of the doctorate in sociology, despite its time-consuming character and questionable utility, is more or less forced to complete the master's degree in some way in the process of acquiring the Ph.D.

Although most sociology departments accept applications for their doctoral programs from persons who have earned master's degrees in sociology elsewhere, there seems to be a decided disadvantage for the Ph.D.-bound student in taking the M.A. degree in a department different from the one in which he intends to work for the doctorate. This is especially the case with the leading departments. Some of these departments accept no transfer credit whatsoever, while others accept only very limited credits and insist that the student take the department's own Ph.D. core program regardless of any previous work completed. In these cases, the doctoral applicant with the master's degree is functionally evaluated as though he were a bachelor's degree applicant, and the tendency to downgrade the importance of work completed elsewhere appears to increase with the prestige of the department.

It appears that most departments, and particularly the leading ones reporting in this survey, prefer to husband their doctoral candidates from first year status, through the master's degree , and on through

the doctorate, if possible. Therefore, although students possessing M.A. degrees are often accepted for the doctoral programs of such departments, they find that they must undergo a complete departmental evaluation along with the freshman graduate students regardless of their previous graduate work. This usually results in a duplication of much of the course work taken for the master's degree elsewhere. Thus, the student seeking the doctorate in sociology today fares best by entering a doctoral program as a freshman graduate student in the department in which he wishes to work for a Ph.D. This, of course, is contrary to the long-standing academic custom of taking the master's degree in a department with a theoretical and/or methodological tradition different from the one found in the department in which the student intends to take the doctorate.

The role of the master's degree in the preparation of the Ph.D.-level sociologist today is largely that of an evaluation process that has been shown to be time-consuming and completely unrelated to the future professional productivity of the candidate. The degree, per se, seems to be of little value to the student seeking to become a professional Ph.D.-level sociologist. This is so because, as the results of this survey make clear, the master's degree in Ph.D.-granting departments of sociology today, for whatever its meaning and role have been in the past, serves principally as a measure of the student's potential for successfully completing a doctoral program and becoming, thereby, a member of the professional community. It is primarily a mechanism that functions to socialize promising students into the profession and to cool out those who are inept or unmotivated. It is only in a remote

sense that it certifies competence at a given level of training. As such, it is a rite de passage that most departments may be loathe to give up.

However, it would seem that doctoral students could profitably be offered alternative measures to the master's degree that would be of greater value and relevance to their future professional life. One possibility would be to offer them the preparation and completion of a piece of sociological research of publishable quality in lieu of the formal requirements for the master's degree. Such an alternative would preserve the evaluation function that the degree appears to fulfill in present doctoral programs while its dissertation-preparation functions would be served by both the directed research for the "master's level" project and the formal course work of the doctoral program. If this produced desirable results, the master's degree requirement could simply be eliminated for doctoral students. In this way, the preparation of the professional Ph.D.-level sociologist would be strengthened by focusing his training primarily upon his future professional needs. At the same time, he would be spared the time-consuming and professionally useless necessity of fulfilling the largely ceremonial formal requirements for the master's degree.

At this point, it seems appropriate to add that the changes that have taken place in the profession and in the economy over the past ten years or so have made the issue of the utility and meaningfulness of the master's degree in sociology a timely and relevant concern for the non-Ph.D.-pursuing graduate student as well. In the not too distant past, the M.A. degree in sociology had distinct employment value in teaching and research where permanent employment was not conditional upon the earning of the doctorate. While this is still true to some

extent today, the burgeoning of new Ph.D. programs in sociology during the 1960's and early 1970's, coupled with much more slowly expanding job opportunities, has resulted in a very highly competitive employment market. In this situation, the job applicant with only a master's degree, finds himself in an extremely weak, if not completely untenable, position.

Because sociology lacks the well-defined and well-developed applied practice fields that characterize some related disciplines, such as psychology, very little attention has been paid in the profession to the issue of preparing master's degree graduates to be employable as sub-doctoral professionals in specific applied fields. Given the marginal employability of most current M.A. graduates in sociology, it would seem to be profitable both to the profession and to the community to encourage the development of terminal professional master's degree programs in applied areas such as corrections, human services, research methods and techniques, human resources development, and industrial sociology, to name a few. Programs such as these could prepare students for immediate employment and could also allow for the few "select" or "promising" students who might emerge in them to continue on to the doctorate, either immediately or in the future. The development of such programs would seem to be most appropriate for non-Ph.D.-granting departments. However, the development of such terminal degree programs in departments offering doctoral programs is equally feasible. This could be carried out concurrently with the offering of alternatives to and eventual elimination of the formal M.A. degree requirements for the doctorate as discussed earlier.

As well as generating new programs for the master's degree and lending future orientation to the doctoral program, these proposed

changes should produce two important additional benefits. First, the meaning of the master's degree in sociology would be made much clearer and less equivocal as a terminal professional degree signifying competence in a specific field of applied sociology. Second, while the establishment of such degree programs could in no way initiate jobs or guarantee employment upon graduation, it would definitely enhance the marketability of M.A. level graduates by certifying their competence to perform a specified level of professional work in a given area.

The place of the master's degree in current programs of higher education in sociology is fundamentally one of misalignment with the "world out there," so to speak, for both the Ph.D. graduate embarking on a professional career and for the M.A. graduate seeking immediate employment. By making changes of the sort suggested by the results of this study, both types of misalignment might be ameliorated. Master's degree programs can be modified to offer viable alternatives for both M.A. graduates and potential employers. Doctoral programs can offer alternatives to the formal requirements for the M.A. degree and thereby speed the day that the doctoral candidate can become a productive member of a professional community. In both cases, the master's degree in the preparation of the professional sociologist can be made to benefit rather than to hinder the education of the graduate student in sociology.

FOOTNOTES

1. Eighteen of the departments of sociology responding to this survey were among the twenty-one departments rated most highly by Roose and Andersen in terms of quality of graduate faculty. They include the following with their Roose and Andersen rankings in parentheses:

Berkeley (1)
Chicago (3)
Michigan (4)
Wisconsin (6)
North Carolina (7)
UCLA (8)
Cornell (9)
Johns Hopkins (9)
Princeton (9)
Washington (Seattle) (13)
Yale (13)
Minnesota (15)
Stanford (15)
Michigan State (17)
Texas (17)
Indiana (19)
Brandeis (20)
Pennsylvania (20)

2. The one leading department reporting a terminal degree program indicated that it offered concentrations in teaching and in quantitative methods. The nine other departments offering terminal M.A.'s reported concentrations in social welfare (2), demography (2), urban (1), community organization (4), corrections (6), deviance and social control (1), social change in developing areas (1), as well as in teaching (1), and in quantitative methods (5).

3. The comments of the seven leading departments reporting in the "Other" category can be paraphrased as follows:

"Accept the M.A. but require demonstration of proficiency in theory and methodology by examination or courses;" "accept

a maximum of nine courses; "depends in part on evaluation of student's M.A. program;" "require own core program and accept some electives and demonstrated competencies(2);" "one year M.A. course work accepted toward Ph.D.;" "credit for M.A. and student advised to take core."

The comments of the other fourteen departments reporting in this category were classifiable as follows:

Up to one-half the hours required for Ph.D. transferable if comparable to curriculum and earned minimum of "B" in each (7); no skills transferable; one year residence required after M.A.; three years work required for Ph.D. (1); each case is evaluated individually (6).

TABLE 1

ROLE OF MASTER'S PROGRAM IN DEPARTMENTS REQUIRING

MASTER'S DEGREE AS PART OF DOCTORAL PROGRAM

"Please check as many of the following as describe what the Master's program is designed to accomplish as part of your doctoral program."

	Provides skills and knowledge essential to dissertation		Provides research experience essential to dissertation		Provides evaluation of student's ability to complete program		Provides program for students unable to complete doctorate	
DEPARTMENT	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
[a] Leading	10	83	9	75	12	100	6	50
[b] Other	54	95	43	75	55	96	42	74
[c] All	64	93	52	75	67	97	48	70

[a] total N = 12

[b] total N = 57

[c] total N = 69

TABLE 2

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF DEPARTMENTS INTERESTED IN

CONSIDERING APPLICANTS WITH MASTER'S DEGREES FROM OTHER DEPARTMENTS

"How interested are you in applicants with Master's degrees?"

	Much more interested than in Bachelor's degree applicants		No more interested than in Bachelor's degree applicants		Will consider only outstanding or exceptional M.A. applicants		[d]Other	
DEPARTMENT	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
[a]Leading	1	6	13	72	4	22	0	0
[b]Other	10	15	33	48	23	34	2	3
[c]All	11	13	46	54	27	31	2	2

[a]total N = 18

[b]total N = 68

[c]total N = 86

[d]comments reported included:

"Seek a balance of good M.A. and Ph.D. students."
"Each case is judged on its own merits. M.A.'s are desired because they are used as assistant instructors."
"Prefer 'trained' undergraduates with sociology majors."
"Must have some indication of promise."

TABLE 3

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF DEPARTMENTS ACCEPTING CREDIT

FOR MASTER'S DEGREE WORK DONE ELSEWHERE

"Please indicate how much of the successful applicant's Master's program work you usually accept for credit toward completion of your doctoral program."

	All course work and other demonstrated competencies corresponding to curriculum		All course work corresponding to curriculum but no other competencies		Only course work corresponding to electives. Student must take core program		No courses or other credits. Student regarded as beginning graduate student		[d] Other	
DEPARTMENT	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
[a] Leading	6	33	2	11	1	6	2	11	7	39
[b] Other	26	38	16	23	10	15	2	3	14	21
[c] All	32	37	18	21	11	13	4	5	21	24

[a] total N = 18

[b] total N = 68

[c] total N =86

[d] See footnote #3 for comments reported here

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